

Karum director: Katz viewed as enigmatic, yet intense

(Editor's note: This is the final part of a six-part series examining the Karum Group School, a facility for disturbed teen-agers in Whatcom County. Herald reporters Bob Partlow and Teresa Allen spent five months researching the organization. Today's story focuses on Karum Director Larry Katz.)

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Of the Herald Staff
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Larry Katz's voice cracks with intensity. And his never-peaceful hands stab at the air in an unconscious search for the perfect hard-hitting analogy to drive home his point.

He punches off the classical music that is piped through his office and pours himself a cup of coffee. In the corner stands a videotape machine. He switches it on to keep a record of the interview for his files.

He is short and slight, dressed in a turtleneck sweater and polyester trousers. His hair, only months ago ponytailed and stringy, is now short cropped and inconsequential. People who know Katz say his looks have grown more conservative during the last year.

When he becomes agitated, his eyes grow large, his eyebrows arch and his voice takes on an exaggerated quality that sounds exactly like comedian George Carlin going into one of his nightclub routines. When he talks, he slips in and out of 1960s hip vernacular with the greatest of ease.

At age 19, Katz was busted in California for peddling drugs, reportedly out of an ice cream truck, and put on five years' probation. He entered a drug program, learned the ropes and modified the program; and today, at 30, he is a founder and a director of the Karum Group School for troubled teen-agers, located in Whatcom County.

Some say Katz is a controversial character who rubs many people the wrong way. Others say he is a fascinating enigma and as changeable as the weather.

He stresses nutrition, but students say he often sends out for junk food for himself. He requires short hair of his students, but only recently cut his own hair and trimmed his bushy beard. He insists on strict behavior from his students, but can often be found "rodding" around country roads on his 650 BMW motorcycle or in sport cars.

"I remember seeing him driving like a madman down the roads by the Karum school in his blue BMW sports car," said Tom Tidmarsh Jr., a neighbor of Katz. Tidmarsh said that during one speedy escapade Katz literally ran a car off the road, leaving behind an angry man shaking his fist in a cloud of dust.

"What worried me the most were the kids in the back of the car," Tidmarsh added.

By his supporters, Katz has been called everything from a near genius to a forerunner in the field of education, and by his detractors, everything from a creep to a cult leader. His rehabilitation program has been called a mixture of evangelical fervor and Marine Corps drill-sergeant tactics.

But Katz says all the negative comments are lies, slander and mostly jealousy. To Katz, it is all very simple.

"We're just a ma-and-pa station out in the tulies," Katz told the Mercer Island Reporter in 1979.

Katz said he was spurred into the child-care business because of his own turbulent past that had him in and out of trouble until he finally was "turned around" by a drug-rehabilitation program.

Today, he said, his goal is to do for other kids what was done for him.

Lawrence Eliot Katz was born in San Bernardino, Calif., in 1949 to an affluent couple named Joseph and Madia Katz. Katz's father is a superior court judge for the county of San Bernardino. His mother is a probation officer in the same county. Katz has one sister.

Katz said he has certain negative feelings about growing up and added that he felt his parents should not

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